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Statement submitted by Universal Peace Federation, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Social protection of girls and women from discrimination, physical and sexual abuse and the elimination of barriers to opportunity are critical for their empowerment. United Nations and government policies and initiatives on all levels are important for assuring our progress. This statement is written to highlight a natural social protection with the longest and most sustainable effect on female empowerment that is rarely mentioned in discussions or strategies — perhaps because this source develops from early childhood. This unique and foundational resource, clearly shown to contribute to the optimal development and flourishing of every girl is her loving, involved, responsible father.

The International Conference for Population and Development, 4.27, recognized the importance of fatherhood and called for promoting men's active involvement and shared responsibility in their children's education and health from the earliest stage in his child's life. Males sharing responsibility for the care and education of children model gender equality in the home. Engaged fathers are more likely to seek and encourage equal educational opportunities for both sons and daughters.

Around the world, we have witnessed a serious breakdown of the family. This has led to the decrease in fathers' involvement and solo-mothers taking on the full responsibilities of raising her children. The number of single mothers is increasing around the world. According to the United Nations Population Fund Annual Report 2018, 60 per cent of mothers in the European Union are not married. Unmarried cohabiting couples can be great parents; however, the breakup rate for cohabiters is close to twice as much as a married couple. This typically leaves the mother parenting alone and the children experiencing emotional upheaval. Single mothers deserve praise and support for the unconditional love, tireless effort, and loving sacrifices they make for their children. Many are successful. However, single mothers are the first to say raising children alone is very difficult. Should we just accept this and leave women bearing an unequal brunt of parental responsibility and children experiencing family disruption? Clearly, we need to give more effort towards creating family stability and equal responsibility of mothers and fathers.

Reflecting this concern for single-parent families, research consistently indicates that fatherless boys and girls experience increased risk of emotional, social, and behavioural problems and poorer academic achievement. Any one of these present barriers to a child's success, especially the most disadvantaged in underdeveloped areas. The data indicate that fatherless daughters are at particular risk for depression, diminishing a girl's self-confidence to face the challenges of career and life. Furthermore, girls raised without loving, engaged fathers are more likely to experience earlier sexual debut and suffer sexual and physical abuse by boys and men. The emotional trauma resulting can be long enduring. In addition, these risks lead to STDs, HIV/AIDS, and early and unwanted pregnancy–obviously all of which are severe barriers to girl's life goals.

Studies show that when girls have a secure and loving relationship with their father they have more self-confidence and higher expectations of respectful treatment from other males as compared to fatheriess girls. Well-fathered girls statistically make better choices for respectful partners and healthy, committed relationships than girls not experiencing a loving father. This secure sense of self, nurtured in a father's cherishing, can protect and uplift a woman in every aspect throughout her life.

Can government or social agencies offer such a fundamental protection and secure launching into the world? Clearly, not. It is more the case that governments and social agencies have to expend an enormous amount of money and effort to make

up for the disadvantages many fatherless girls bear. Despite the well-meaning determination of government and social agencies, how effective are these late substitutions? As stated above, mothers are essential and single mothers do heroic jobs, and yet, there is no replacement for the unique foundation a caring father can give to his daughter.

Of course, not all fathers are responsible or protective. Biological fathers can be horribly abusive. Girls should not remain in harmful relationships with fathers or father figures who are unwilling to seek professional help. Sadly, for some it is almost impossible to leave and this needs addressing. However, prevention of fragile family formation and abuse also must receive attention. Studies indicate that girls are at greatest risk for physical and sexual abuse with romantic partners of their mother, much more than with the biological father who is in a committed relationship with the mother. A stable mother-father relationship offers a unique social protection for their children as, according to some studies, the marital commitment increases the investment into and stability of the parenting relationship, especially for men. There is truth in the saying that the greatest gift a father can give to his children is a loving, committed relationship with the mother.

The toll of single parenting is heavy for women. Single motherhood increases vulnerabilities and removes some social protections. Single mothers suffer at a greater rate from depression, health problems, and poverty, and experience less educational advancement. Studies show that unmarried women also are at higher risk for domestic violence. Women should never stay in abusive relationships; that should be without saying, and some relationships or marriages are better to end. However, educational programs have shown that couples experiencing typical couple discord can learn how to handle conflict constructively and safely and become happier and more stable. It is understandable that couples end in divorce when they have not learned basic communication skills and conflict management. These are teachable skills, which improve relationships and the well-being of all family members.

Evidence shows that engaged and responsible fathers actually provide unique social protection and empowerment to mothers. Mothers supported by a stable marriage are more likely to follow their dreams whether it be receiving education, entering the workforce, pursuing a career, and/or having more time to care for young children or elderly relatives.

In conclusion, Universal Peace Federation would encourage exploring proactive measures and family-oriented policies for enhancing the unique empowerment and protection that conscientious fathers can provide. Many countries have initiated policies to increase birthrates, but the cohesion of the relationship between the mother and father must receive attention too. Policies and educational and cultural programs should be evaluated by their strengthening or weakening fathers' roles and responsibilities. The sustainable achievement of female flourishing will not be accomplished without men taking up their portion of responsibility. The role of the father offers a wellspring for the optimal development of girls and full engagement of women in the world.